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Re: Using placebos - why not tell the patient?

Many physicians find themselves in a double bind: They want to use the “powers of the placebo” for the therapeutic benefit of their patients but at the same time they believe – as

Tilburt et al show – that they cannot confront their patients with the fact of their being offered a treatment that works through positive expectations or other non-specific effects rather than through a physiological mechanism triggered by certain properties of a drug or procedure. But is openly providing placebos really incompatible with a modern patient-physician-relationship that considers the patient a partner in therapeutic decisions? From our own ongoing research involving Swiss primary care providers we gather that a substantial percentage of physicians fear patients would be disappointed if they found out they had received a placebo. We are not certain if this assumption is justified given that many patients use medicine and unconventional approaches in parallel, many of them hiding the fact of their “dual use” from their physician. (1) There may be a mutual misunderstanding of expectations: physicians believing patients would be disappointed or even insulted if they made use of placebo treatments in an open way, and patients fearing their physicians would be offended if they knew their

patients were trying approaches patients themselves might consider as having more to do with their own expectations and psychophysiological responses than with a specific effect of the intervention. In order to settle this important issue we urgently need to investigate the patient perspective and compare it to physicians’ attitudes. It may turn out patients are much more open and willing to experiment with placebo interventions than is generally assumed.

1. Eisenberg DM, Kessler RC, Foster C, Norlock FE, Calkins DR, Delbanco TL. Unconventional medicine in the United States: prevalence, costs, and patterns of use. *N Engl J Med* 1993;328:246-52.

Competing interests: None declared